

White feminism

White feminism is a form of feminism that focuses on the struggles of white women while failing to address distinct forms of oppression faced by ethnic minority women and women lacking other privileges.^{[1][2]} White feminism is criticized for its feminist theories that focus solely on the experience of white women and fail to acknowledge and integrate the notion of intersectionality in the struggle for equality.^[3] This approach was predominantly visible in the first waves of feminism which generally centered around the empowerment of white middle-class females in Western societies.^[4]

While the term *white feminism* and debate around the topic are relatively recent, its critics date back to the beginning of the feminist movement, especially in the United States.^[5] By theorizing the overlapping systems of oppression in society (dependent on race, ethnicity, sexuality, gender, etc.), the development of Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality has recently galvanized critics of white feminism, described as restrictive and discriminatory.^[6]

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Origins

Since its origin, feminism in Western societies has been represented by white educated women primarily focusing on the right to political representation and vote.^[7] One of the most prominent examples of the early feminist revindications is found in Mary Wollstonecraft's text, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* published in 1792 and in which she advocates for moral and political equality between men and women.^[8] Similarly, in France, Olympe de Gouges advocated for women's rights in her Declaration of the Rights of Woman and of the Female Citizen as early as 1791.^[9]

In first-wave feminism

First-wave feminism began in the early modern period and continued into the early 20th century, and focused primarily on legal issues pertaining to women, especially women's suffrage. This wave officially started with the 1848 Seneca Falls Convention in Seneca Falls, New York, towards the end of the Industrial Revolution. The goal of this wave was to open up opportunities for women, with a focus on suffrage.^[10] It was a movement predominantly organized and defined by middle-class, educated white women, and concentrated mostly on issues pertaining to them.^{[11][12]}

Some ethnic minority women were embraced in the movement, such as suffragette Princess Sophia Duleep Singh among the British first-wave feminists. However, there is little evidence that black women participated in the British suffragette effort. In 1893, New Zealand became the first nation to grant women of all races the right to vote; this was met with anger from suffragists including Millicent Fawcett, who expressed displeasure that Māori women in one of the British colonies were able to vote, while British women of society were not.^[13] Susan B. Anthony (a staunch abolitionist) and Elizabeth Cady Stanton fought for white women to get the right to vote in the United States of America, prioritizing this above black men getting the right to vote.^[14] Anthony and Stanton were wary of creating an "aristocracy of sex"; rather, they proposed universal suffrage, such that the black community and women (including black women) get enfranchised at the same time.



Women's suffrage parade in New York City, May 6, 1912.

Nevertheless, their "History of Woman Suffrage", is a clear example of white feminism as it widely disregards the role of black women while focusing on white figures of the movement. While 1920 is celebrated as the abstention of Women's suffrage in the United States, African American women were still evicted from voting polls in the Jim Crow South. At that time, white women largely viewed African American women as excluded from the feminist movement and the black suffragist Mary Church Terrel was denied the help of white activists.^[15] Still, African American women have had an important role in the battle for equality in the United States. As early as 1851, Sojourner Truth, a former slave, delivered a speech "Ain't I a woman" in which she calls for what would be later on described as intersectionality.^[16]

In second-wave feminism

Second wave feminism began in the 1960s and lasted through the 1980s. This time period focused on women in the work environment, sexuality, reproductive rights, domestic violence and rape.^[17] Second-wave feminism, particularly at its outset, was similarly shaped by middle-class, educated white women, and again it did not tend to consider issues that were specifically relevant to ethnic minority women.^[18] During this time, the Miss America Pageant took place in Atlantic City in 1968. Feminists gathered outside, throwing bras, griddles and fake eyelashes into a trash can to demonstrate their frustrations with the male gaze and the degrading beauty standards that surrounded the Miss America Pageant.^[19] The second wave also began to incorporate women of color, whereas the first wave focused mostly on white, cis-gender, middle class women.^[20]

The Second Sex by Simone de Beauvoir, stands as the one of the most striking example of the essentialization of women in the figure of the white bourgeoisie mother and hence disregard for other forms of oppressions such as race or sexuality. Nevertheless, this book has appeared as a landmark which has enabled other more complex theories to emerge.^[21]

During the second and third-wave feminist periods, scholars from marginalised communities began to write back against the way in which feminist movements had been essentializing the experiences of women. The notable feminist scholar bell hooks brought this issue to the forefront of feminist thought, regularly writing about the struggles that black women experienced and emphasizing that the feminist movement was exclusionary towards those women by virtue of its inattention to the interactions between race, gender, and class.^[22] hooks argued that white women should recognise the fact that they, like ethnic minority men, occupied a position of being both oppressed while also being oppressors. In an attempt to shun the critics addressed by scholars from minorities exposing second-wave feminism, the latter sought to divert attention by exposing inequalities and injustice faced by women abroad. This has been criticized by many scholars which have labeled it under several names such as missionary or imperialist feminism.^[23]

In third-wave feminism

Led by Gen X, third wave feminism began in the 1990s when issues surrounding sexuality and pornography were brought to the forefront.^[24] Third wave feminists coined the term "riot grrls" which represented strong, independent and passionate feminists in this time period. "Grrls" were typically described as angry feminists fighting against sexism.^[25] The third wave was inspired by the post-modern society and worked to reclaim derogatory words used to shame women like, 'slut,' 'whore,' and 'slut' and take away the power these words gave men over women. This also worked to advocate for women's sexual liberation and expression of gender identity.^[24] This wave also included even more women of color and women from different classes than previous waves.^[24]

21st century intersectional feminism, or fourth wave

During third wave feminism and at the start of fourth wave feminism after 2010, feminists sometimes emphasize intersectional perspectives in their work.^[26] Despite this, some have argued that feminist media continues to overrepresent the struggles of straight, middle class, white women.^{[27][18]} The position held by some modern feminist authors that racism is not an element of society that feminism needs to be concerned with has also been cited as exemplifying white feminism.^[28] Nevertheless, in recent years, authors like Kimberle Crenshaw have developed the theory of intersectionality, a clear opposition to white feminism. Rather than analyzing society from a unique perspective of race or gender, she calls for a more complex analysis of systems of oppression using multiple and overlapping lenses such as race, gender, sexuality, etc.^[29]

White feminism portrays a view of feminism that can be separated from issues of class, race, ability, and other oppressions. An example of white feminism in the present day can be seen in the work of Emily Shire,^[30] politics editor at Bustle and an op-ed contributor for The New York Times. Shire argues that feminism excludes some women who do not share political viewpoints when it takes positions on Israel and Palestine, efforts to raise the minimum wage, and efforts to block the construction of oil pipelines.^[31] Shire's position contrasts with intersectional feminist activists who view pay equity, social justice, and international human rights as essential and inseparable commitments of feminism, as articulated in the Day Without a Woman platform that "[recognizes] the enormous value that women of all backgrounds add to our socio-economic system – while receiving lower wages and experiencing greater inequities, vulnerability to discrimination, sexual harassment, and job insecurity".^[32] While Shire advocates for a feminism that achieves inclusivity by avoiding political positions so as to not alienate women who disagree with those positions,^[31] organizers of the Women's March hold the principle that "women have intersecting identities" necessitating a movement that focuses on a "comprehensive agenda".^[33]

It has also been argued that the beliefs of some feminists that hijabs, burqas, and niqabs are oppressive towards Muslim women are representative of white feminism. Many Muslim women have spoken out in defense of their religious dress practices.^[34] One example of this belief is the Islamic scarf controversy in France that has argued against the Islamic veil by many French feminists claiming that Islam threatens women's autonomy and thus choosing to wear one is meaningless, when many Muslim women say that it is a choice and that denying the choice only restricts a woman's freedom. They say that some wear it as a personal commitment; others reject the notion that the veil is a religious sign.^[35] Some Muslim women see burqa as freeing, because it enabled them to be in the public sphere while still observing moral and religious requirements.^[36]

Trans-exclusionary radical feminism has also been a topic of discussion. Feminism requires fighting for women's rights, but trans-exclusionary radical feminists do not see trans women as women. Many of them argue against trans women changing their sex on legal documents, say that *lesbian* as an identity is disappearing, that trans men are not men, and that gay children need protection when they think they are transgender.^[37] Critics, especially within the LGBT community, have expressed their discontent with these

arguments. They feel that privileged white women who make these arguments will make trans women, especially trans women of color, more at risk for discrimination and that they fail to consider many other factors that trans women have to deal with.^[38]

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